

# **“Expect the Truth”: Exploiting History with *Mandingo***

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## **Introduction**

The promotional poster for the exploitation film *Mandingo* prominently features a muscular black man firmly holding a partially disrobed white woman close to his shirtless body. Set against a fiery red sky, this couple is juxtaposed with another pair, a white man carrying a fainting black woman in his arms. The black woman's dress strap dangles halfway down her shoulder, ironically evoking the image of Rhett Butler embracing Scarlett O'Hara from the classic movie poster for *Gone with the Wind*.<sup>1</sup> While these arresting depictions of passion dominate the space, the lower portion of the poster is populated with smaller scenes of intense violence: a black man hangs by his feet as a white man disciplines him with a wooden paddle; a band of whites on horseback chases a runaway slave; two half-naked black men wrestle each other for the entertainment of a crowd of cheering white men. Immediately above the two couples, stark black letters promise a revelatory experience: “Expect the savage. The sensual. The shocking. The sad. The powerful. The shameful. Expect all that the motion picture screen never dared to show before. Expect the truth. Now you are ready for *Mandingo*.”

Released in 1975, the film *Mandingo* was a critical disaster as reviewers both black and white scourged it with all manner of puritanical condemnations. Yet, in an age where the press could often decide a film's financial fate, *Mandingo* was wildly popular with audiences, becoming the eighteenth highest

grossing film of the year.<sup>2</sup> In our own time the film occupies a peculiar place in the pantheon of popular culture as its title has become a polysemous sign in the ever-morphing lexicon of American slang. A cursory internet search of the word reveals that “Mandingo” could refer to a historic West African linguistic group that spans several modern geopolitical nations, a contemporary African American male porn star, or the name of a small, white-owned business out of Owosso, Michigan that sells locally grown and bottled dill pickles.<sup>3</sup> The word conjures up associations of illicit interracial sex and/or the myth of the well-endowed “black stud,” perhaps supporting the claims of the film’s detractors that it was a tawdry exercise in “sexploitation sociology.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, in the 38 years since the film’s release, it has attracted a cadre of apologists from academia, most notably Robin Wood, who in a 1998 essay titled “*Mandingo*: The Vindication of an Abused Masterpiece” cited the film as being “the greatest Hollywood film about race.”<sup>5</sup> Linda Williams has made similar claims for the film’s enduring relevance, arguing that *Mandingo* continues to speak volumes to contemporary racialized sexual dynamics, particularly in light of the explosion of interracial pornography via the World Wide Web.<sup>6</sup> Robert Kaser has offered the most recent academic reappraisal of the film, interpreting it as a “serious statement about the socio-economic order in the form of a melodrama” and placing it alongside other antiestablishment films of 1975, including *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Dog Day Afternoon*.<sup>7</sup>

Scholarly examinations of *Mandingo* vary in their approaches and conclusions, but all share a general interest in the film’s provocative textual features (depictions of race, gender dynamics, pornographic appeal, etc.). While it is certainly an arresting film text, little has been written on how the film was received during its 1975 theatrical run. Virtually all of the academic literature on *Mandingo* claims that audiences flocked to the film while critics condemned it, yet this tension is rarely explored with nuance or complexity. In such constructions, critics are often conceived as one homogenous community, and their universal hatred of the film is usually supported with a few quotes from film reviewers. The audience is also constructed as monolithic, and its acceptance of the film is represented only in terms of box office receipts. These broad, impressionistic characterizations barely capture the reception event that *Mandingo* truly was, and I propose that more research is required in order to truly understand the film’s cultural significance. Specifically, I am interested in the following questions: How was *Mandingo* received upon its 1975 release by various groups of people, particularly white film critics, black film critics, and black movie audiences? Why was it received so? Lastly, what does the film’s reception mean, particularly in relationship to contemporary filmic cultural discourses about race and sexuality? In order to answer these questions, I first offer a synopsis of the plot as well as a brief history of the film, from inception to production through its theatrical release. Second, I employ the historical materialist approach to media reception proposed by Janet Staiger in which film reception is conceived as an event that is reconstructed through historical traces (film reviews, advertisements, etc.),

and I use these sources to recreate the multifaceted story of the film's release.<sup>8</sup> Finally, I engage in a more detailed analysis of *Mandingo*'s reception. I argue that the criticism of the film is only intelligible when contextualized by numerous debates circulating in the 1970s in regards to court rulings on obscenity, the race and respectability debates of "blaxploitation" films, and the emergence of film critics as cultural experts.

### **"Now You are Ready for *Mandingo*"**

*Mandingo* opens with a long shot of Falconhurst, a decaying antebellum plantation ruled by the Maxwells, an aging widower and his adult son. Falconhurst is a breeding plantation, and the Maxwells have become renowned for selling slaves of a particularly exceptional pedigree. Male slaves are inspected for blemishes and sold to other slavers like chattel, while female slaves are given the "honor" of being deflowered by the young Hammond Maxwell (played by Perry King). After the "wench" is broken in by the Master, and if their encounter has not already impregnated her, she will be paired up with a suitable "buck" in the hopes of breeding more human chattel. The elder Maxwell (played by James Mason), whose aging body is racked with rheumatism, is troubled that his son has not fathered any children with "human blood" (children of "pure" white parentage), thus placing the future of the family business in jeopardy. He compels his son to find a wife to bear them a male child, and Hammond dutifully enters into a marriage of convenience with his cousin, the aptly named Blanche (played by Susan George). Hammond is horrified to discover on their wedding night that his delicate Southern belle has been previously "pleasured" by another man. Her impurity disgusts him, and he angrily withholds sex from her, opting instead to cohabituate with Ellen (played by Brenda Sykes), a beautiful slave for whom he has grown "tender."

As the film progresses, the mutual attraction between the master Hammond and the slave Ellen grows into an openly loving relationship. The emotionally and sexually spurned Blanche responds to this affront by demanding sex from Mede (played by Ken Norton, shown in figure 1), her husband's prize-fighting "Mandingo buck," blackmailing the slave with accusations of rape if he refuses. Blanche becomes pregnant by Mede the slave, but convinces her husband, who grudgingly granted his jealous wife one night of union to satisfy his father's desire for an heir, that the child is his. Eventually the baby is born black, triggering a flurry of violence. Hammond mercilessly poisons his wife and murders Mede the Mandingo. When the slave mistress Ellen tries to stop Hammond's rampage, he informs her that she is nothing "but a nigger" to him and casts her aside. Hammond's violence incites a slave revolt that results in his father's murder. The film closes with the lives of the denizens of Falconhurst in complete devastation, wrenched apart by the horrid institution of slavery.

The film version of *Mandingo* was adapted from a novel of the same name written by Kyle Onstott, an elderly Californian recluse who judged dog shows and



**Figure 1:** Ken Norton as Medea. Courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

wrote books about canine breeding. Influenced by his adopted son, an anthropologist who studied West African tribes, Onstott created Falconhurst, a plantation specializing in breeding physically superior slaves chosen exclusively from descendants of the Mandingo people (or more properly, Mandinka), a historic ethnic group inhabiting large portions of West Africa. Despite its bulk of over 600 pages, Onstott's novel went on to sell over 4.5 million copies. Critics called *Mandingo* "a terrible experience" and "a stinking mess," and Onstott himself was not particularly fond of the work, but it brought him enough revenue to retire. *Mandingo* spawned thirteen sequels (all written by other authors), and to date, the series has sold over 16 million copies.<sup>9</sup>

Although Hollywood had been adapting popular novels to screen for decades, a film version of *Mandingo* would have been impossible in 1959 because film content was regulated by the declining but still powerful Production Code which forbade explicit sex, the presentation of adultery as attractive, and the depiction of brutal killings "in detail."<sup>10</sup> In the intervening years between the novel and the film, the movie industry experienced a series of radical changes, most notably the replacement of the Code in 1968 with the MPAA Ratings System (G, PG, R, X), liberating filmmakers to explore themes that had been taboo for decades. A second significant shift in the industry came in 1971 when the surprise success of a black-themed action film, Melvin Van Peebles' independently produced *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, turned Hollywood's attention to a then-untapped market. Hollywood, which had been struggling against the dominance of television for years, had found a new cash cow, and began to rapidly churn out scores of black action films each year. *Variety* magazine coined the term "blaxploitation," a portmanteau of the words "black" and "exploitation," to capture how these gritty urban dramas exploited black audiences' desires to see themselves on screen and their apparent appetite for "sex, violence and

'super-cool' individualism."<sup>11</sup> By the late 1970s, due to the rising popularity of crossover films like *Star Wars* (1977) among black audiences, as well as the successful co-opting of the genre's core themes and motifs into white action films like *Walking Tall* (1973), interest in "blaxploitation" waned, and the genre had all but disappeared by 1978.<sup>12</sup>

*Mandingo* can thus be read as the last great gasp of a declining genre. The film was the brainchild of Dino De Laurentiis, legendary Italian-born producer of hundreds of internationally marketed films, whose reputation is best captured by the title of a 1975 *New York Times* article: "He Makes Movies That Make Money."<sup>13</sup> De Laurentiis loftily stated that *Mandingo* was intended to "reach beyond the sentimentalized South of other films with uncompromising honesty and realism to show the true brutalizing nature of slavery."<sup>14</sup> De Laurentiis assigned the project to Richard Fleischer, an American director known in the industry as "a hack for hire" who "acknowledged that he didn't initiate any of his films."<sup>15</sup> Despite Fleischer's underwhelming reputation, he approached this project soberly: "The whole slavery story has been lied about, covered up and romanticized so much I thought it really had to stop . . . The only way to stop was to be brutal as I could possibly be."<sup>16</sup> Despite Fleischer's high-minded mission, Paramount Pictures marketed *Mandingo* in the manner of a classic exploitation film, as evidenced by the salacious promotional poster. Opening in May of 1975, *Mandingo* did particularly well in major cities with large black populations. In some cities it remained in theatres through November, and it became a second-run staple in grindhouse theatres in New York City's Times Square.<sup>17</sup> As was previously mentioned, it was among the top twenty grossing films of the year and even spawned a less-successful 1976 sequel, *Drum*.

### Critical Responses of the White Press to *Mandingo*

The film's enormous success is particularly significant in light of the critical furor it incited. Film reviewers of all stripes expressed a collective outrage that bordered on a critical revolt. But, to their dismay, that did not stop *Mandingo* from attracting an enormous audience, particularly from black urban neighborhoods. Although the previous sentence captures the broad outlines of the film's reception history, a closer analysis of the historical evidence reveals a more nuanced story, one that scholars have yet to tell. In the following passages, I will reconstruct *Mandingo* as a reception event. Particularly, I am interested in how the film was received and interpreted by three seemingly disparate but interrelated segments of 1970s American society: the dominant white press, the subaltern black press, and the African American filmgoing public. I will be drawing on a variety of historical traces, including twenty print articles (representing the opinions of both black and white film critics), three print advertisements, one press release for the film, and several anecdotal accounts of the film's reception.<sup>18</sup>

In general, the historical traces confirm that the mainstream white press overwhelmingly disparaged *Mandingo*. Roger Ebert's assessment typifies the reaction of the white press:

*Mandingo* is racist trash, obscene in its manipulation of human beings and feelings, and excruciating to sit through . . . [It] has frontal nudity, flagellation, the auctioning of naked slaves and a fistfight in which heavyweight boxer Ken Norton [Mede] kills his opponent by tearing out his jugular with his teeth . . . This is a film I felt soiled by.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Richard Schickel of *Time* found it "vulgar" and Vicky Taylor of the *Yuma Daily Sun* found it "brutal and sadistic."<sup>20</sup> Overall, white critics primarily objected to the film's content, particularly its depictions of the violence suffered by the black characters. Richard Fleischer made good on his promise to be brutal as possible, and the press interpreted it as an exploitation film bordering on pornography. In fact, Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* directly likened it to pornography, stating that it contained "specific details one more often finds in the close-ups employed in pornographic films."<sup>21</sup>

Canby's comparing *Mandingo* to hardcore pornography is instructive in that it points to a larger discursive context. Critics received *Mandingo* not as a stand-alone film but as a text forming part of a larger cultural discourse that had been raging for several years over the perceived explosion of film depictions of violence and pornography. The Production Code collapsed in 1968 in a series of movies that tested the limits of graphic screen content, most notably two 1967 films, Arthur Penn's ultraviolent *Bonnie and Clyde* and a sexually explicit Swedish import from director Vilgot Sjöman, *I Am Curious (Yellow)*.<sup>22</sup> The ratings system was subsequently tested over the next several years as Hollywood filmmakers released an unprecedented series of gory and/or sexually graphic films, including John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). The 1972 blockbuster adult film *Deep Throat* ushered in a wave of "porno chic" as middle-class audiences flocked to seedy theatres to view the film, thus intensifying the debate over pornography and censorship in popular culture.<sup>23</sup> Although *Mandingo* was certainly not as graphically violent as *A Clockwork Orange* or as pornographic as *Deep Throat*, critics automatically inserted it into this broader conversation. For example, Marilyn Beck and Ellsworth Redinger jointly wrote a *Chicago Tribune* article titled "As Taboos Topple, the Porno Parade Begins" that decried the perceived onslaught of films that "test public passion for intense vicarious transfer" by "appealing to the base instincts of man." The entries in the "porno parade" included *Mandingo*, *Deep Throat*, and Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci's arthouse drama *Last Tango in Paris* (1973, U.S. release).<sup>24</sup> The public debates over the morality of film depictions of sex and violence naturally led some critics to question the efficacy of the ratings system. Critics such as Vincent Canby interpreted *Mandingo* as a cause



for a more effective censorship apparatus. Canby claimed it "make[s] you long for the most high-handed, narrow-minded censorship."<sup>25</sup> Roger Ebert more explicitly saw the film as a failure of the ratings system: "The film has an R rating, which didn't keep many kids out . . . If the city [Chicago] believes *Mandingo* should be shown to children, then there are no possible standards left."<sup>26</sup> Ebert's interpretation of *Mandingo*'s R rating as a sign of the end of moral standards themselves may strike contemporary readers as alarmist hand-wringing, but his comments were quite typical for the time.<sup>27</sup> In fact, almost every negative review of the film from white critics included similar hyperbolic language, and one finds comparable homilies in mainstream reviews of other "immoral" films in that time period.

Interestingly, out of the samples only one white critic found any value in the film. Charles Shere of the *Oakland Tribune* stated: "Maybe the movie is exploitive—but certainly no more than the system it describes . . . There's nothing coy about the sex or violence . . . the plot needs them, and they're shown naturally, inoffensively."<sup>28</sup> Shere was the only white film critic to interpret its explicitness as the filmmaker had intended: that the sex and violence were necessary and appropriate in order to illustrate the horrors of the slavery system. Shere opened his article with the assertion that "the critics, most of whom are incidentally white, have been denouncing *Mandingo* as a thoroughly offensive movie designed to exploit a black audience."<sup>29</sup> He claimed that white critics could not have possibly understood the film, and indirectly implied that black reviewers would appreciate, as he did, the film's avowal of the inherent sexual exploitation woven into the system of slavery. In fact, as we shall see from the comments of the black film critics, Shere's assumptions could not have been more incorrect.

### Critical Responses of the Black Press to *Mandingo*

The historical evidence presents the black critics equaling (if not exceeding) the screeds penned by the white critics. In fact, of the black film reviews surveyed all were overwhelmingly negative. Jacqueline Trescott, a Black reporter covering arts and entertainment for *The Washington Post*, wrote a representative opinion:

Based on the 1957 novel . . . *Mandingo* proves that trash only begets trash. The film is a racist and senseless exploration of human degradation in a whirl of slave auctions, hangings, whippings and fornication . . . [The] characters are emotionless and even for the pornography aficionado, *Mandingo* is a cheap three-ring circus.<sup>30</sup>

Similar sentiments were expressed by Althea Fonville of the *New Pittsburgh Courier* who called it "sickening" and Ida Peters of the *Baltimore Afro American* who said that it "makes you want to vomit."<sup>31</sup> Overall, the responses of black critics were almost identical to those of white critics. This was a particularly

surprising finding to me as a researcher. Before conducting this study, I, like white critic Richard Shere, incorrectly predicted that at least a few of the black critics would see some value in the film. I based this hypothesis on the textual uniqueness of the film: while *Mandingo* was not the first Hollywood film to challenge myths about black inferiority and the harmlessness of slavery (i.e., *Gone with the Wind*), it absolutely was the first film produced by a major studio to challenge centuries of secrecy over the racialized sexual exploitation that was a constituent component of American slavery.<sup>32</sup> I postulated that *some* black critics would have recognized it as a discursive milestone in the history of American film and would have offered some form of praise. In fact, the black press joined their white counterparts in condemning the film as racist, pornographic exploitation.

Although critics both black and white scoured the film, further analysis of the data reveals different social agendas and political commitments driving the responses of the two critical communities. While the white press objected to the film largely on grounds of decency and representational morality, a closer reading of the black critics' responses reveals concerns absent from the white reviews. Black newspapers had for decades been an alternative to the hegemony of the white mainstream press, providing alternative news coverage of racism and injustice that African Americans suffered recurrently. Thus the black press saw *Mandingo* as not merely another tasteless exploitation film, but as a symptom of a racist power structure (Hollywood) eager to capitalize on black audiences' desires to see themselves represented and empowered. Vernon Jarrett, a respected commentator on racial issues and the first Black journalist at the *Chicago Tribune*, vocalized such a perspective with these words: "[*Mandingo* is just] money passing from black hands to white pockets for the degradation of black people . . . That film is a good example of why people who are sick of distortions, filth, and violence must never cease to resist."<sup>33</sup> The phrase "sick of distortions" points to a cultural discourse over representation of blacks that had been raging before the birth of cinema in the form of nineteenth-century minstrelsy.<sup>34</sup> This debate grew particularly heated in the early 1970s as "blaxploitation" became popular among black audiences, and the controversy surrounding *Mandingo* is better understood when placed into a larger historical discourse over "blaxploitation" cinema in general.

The release of the germinal "blaxploitation" film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* in 1971 provoked an almost immediate backlash from the black press, accusing it of exploiting and glorifying the seamier sides of black working class life.<sup>35</sup> *Sweetback* was followed by *Super Fly* (1972), a film allegedly glamorizing the life of a cocaine dealer, and inflamed the debate to a fever pitch: "Noisy black picketers . . . lined the streets outside of theatres carrying signs that read 'Black Shame, White Profits!' and 'We Are Not All Pimps and Whores!'"<sup>36</sup> These films were summarily denounced by Junius Griffin, president of the Beverly Hills/Hollywood NAACP, Jesse Jackson, and pioneering black TV producer Tony Brown.<sup>37</sup> Several influential African American organizations formed the Coalition Against Blaxploitation (CAB), proposing a review board to rate black movies on a five-



point scale (from "superior" to "thoroughly objectionable"). These challenges were answered by "blaxploitation" stars and directors, including Gordon Parks Jr., director of *Super Fly*, who criticized "the so-called black intellectuals" and their proposal of a review board, lamenting that "some black people, egged on by some whites, will use such destructive measures against black endeavors."<sup>38</sup>

Understood in this light, it is not surprising that multiple reviewers acknowledged that their condemnation of *Mandingo* belonged to this larger cultural debate. Vernon Jarrett discussed *Mandingo* in an article titled "Curtain's Still up on Blaxploitation in which he denounced "blaxploitation" films as "sickening spectacles."<sup>39</sup> Althea Fonville titled her review "*Mandingo*-Another Blaxploitation Film," indicating that the film was merely a new entry in a long list of disreputable movies. Ida Peters also positions her discussion of the film in relation to contemporaneous "blaxploitation" releases: "Black folks screamed so loud about . . . *Super Fly* but nobody in the trade even hinted that *Mandingo* was out of line . . . Blaxploitation is alright when it's done by rich white folks?"<sup>40</sup> Black reviewers, who by 1975 had sat through scores of "blaxploitation" productions, merely saw *Mandingo* as an installment in a line of lamentable black-themed films. It should be noted that this debate was not wholly separate from the obscenity debate raging in the white press. Certainly concerns over filmic obscenity in general were present in the black press, and many white critics joined their black counterparts in denouncing "blaxploitation" films as obscene.<sup>41</sup> Yet black critics displayed a particular concern over how these films negatively represented and/or influenced the black community and received "blaxploitation" in general and *Mandingo* in particular as exploitation of black degradation in service to lining white studios' pockets. Additionally, some black critics perceived *Mandingo* as particularly egregious in its claims to tell the "truth" about black history as represented by a comment from Althea Fonville of the historic black newspaper *New Pittsburgh Courier*: "As for telling the true story of the way in which slavery was instituted, it does not do."<sup>42</sup> Jacqueline Trescott similarly criticized it for recreating "a fraction of one of this country's darkest customs without any historical context."<sup>43</sup> The black press interpreted the film as a bastardization of black life and history and insisted that their readers recognize it as a racist distortion of the truth.

Thus we see that white and black critics poorly reviewed the film for differently nuanced reasons, the former group reacting more strongly to the film's ostensibly obscene content and the latter group more often reacting to its misrepresentations of black culture and history. Despite these important nuances, I argue that the reactions of both groups of critics are actually greater in their similarities than in their differences in that they overwhelmingly despised and denounced the film.<sup>44</sup> Therefore I can make the claim that, with minor exception, the critical community (both white and black film critics) hated *Mandingo*. From this point forward, although I will maintain there were subtle but crucial differences between the reactions of black and white critics, I will refer to the "critics" as

a community of journalists who found common ground in their overwhelming disgust over *Mandingo*.

### **Black Audience Responses to *Mandingo***

Of course, critics write reviews for an audience, offering assessments of new releases in the hopes that filmgoers will choose wisely based on their recommendations. In this case, it can easily be said that the critical community did not want audiences to attend a showing of *Mandingo*. The film's box office earnings show that many ignored that advice, but film grosses do not tell us how audiences, particularly black filmgoers, received *Mandingo*. Locating historical documentation about audience feelings towards a film released decades ago proved difficult, but I was able to find many traces of anecdotal evidence that directly described black moviegoers' reactions to the film. In a 1976 interview for the journal *Movie*, Director Richard Fleischer offered this anecdote of the film's reception:

I was really not prepared for the great success of the film . . . I thought it might be blasted by the critics but ignored by the public, who fortunately flocked to see it . . . Black audiences have this extraordinary feeling [at the end of the film]: they get up and cheer when the father has been killed.<sup>45</sup>

Fleischer correctly predicted that his audience would be predominantly black and expressed pleasant surprise by the positive turnout at the box office. He also recounts how some black audience members reacted physically and verbally to the film, an observation bolstered by Bill Landis, who offers the following account: "During one Empire [a Times Square grindhouse] showing, it prompted an agonized black viewer to demand, 'All you white people outta this here audience!'"<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Robin Wood reported that black audiences in London applauded the film with standing ovations.<sup>47</sup> Black audience members, based upon anecdotal evidence, while not exhibiting uniform reactions to the film, displayed a passionate engagement that makes for a stark contrast to the critic's textual resistance.

These anecdotes reveal that large numbers of black audiences responded to the film with a range of reactions, from outrage to celebration. This is corroborated by a valuable article from the *New Pittsburgh Courier*, titled "Pittsburghers Speak Out: Readers Have Mixed Reactions on *Mandingo*" in which six black Pittsburghers were randomly stopped in the street and asked to report on their feelings towards the film. What emerges from this short article is a range of opinions held by the black community towards *Mandingo*. Some upheld the dominant views of media critics. For example, Nate Smith said it was "disgraceful" for making light of a shameful past. Others expressed ambivalence, such as Tommy Lafitte who stated that it was "alright," but was impressed with some of the acting as

well as "the amount of time and money" put into film. Three out of the six people interviewed went against the critical community and praised the film, including Melanie Stewart, who "dug the movie," and cited it as being "factual and real. That was the way it really was." This comment about the reality of the film is of note, for, while the interviewees reported a range of responses to the film, all agreed that *Mandingo* was to some extent "real." What about this obviously fictional film did black viewers find to be "real?" Interviewee Bruce Young asserted that *Mandingo* "told the truth and opened my eyes. There is no such thing as good whites." Melanie Stewart added that "the relationship between whites and the slaves was really like that." Mattie Bender had not even seen the film, but acknowledged that it was trying to depict historical realities: "I've heard that Black and whites [sic] get together in this movie and I don't care for that sort of thing . . . You can hear about the things that whites do to Blacks in those southern states without going to see a whole movie."<sup>48</sup> Black filmgoers proved more receptive to the film's invitation to "expect the truth" and accepted the film's willingness to expose what decades of Hollywood films had suppressed: the ubiquitous sexual abuse of African slaves at the hands of their white masters. This contrasted sharply with the critical community's nearly outright dismissal of the film, and this tension is perfectly illustrated in the following anecdote offered by film critic Ida Peters of the *Baltimore Afro American*:

One reader called and talked a hole in my head on my [negative] *Mandingo* reactions last week. He says after all, *Mandingo* is just a movie. He says the movie shows just how many colors black people come in and how they got that way. He says his grandfather told him tales of slavery days and they were like the movie.<sup>49</sup>

Peters' anonymous caller very naturally and easily did what many of the critics were unable to do. He responded to *Mandingo* as a fictionalized ("just a movie") yet *truthful* text in its depiction of racialized sexual history. Additionally, he corroborated these depictions with oral histories passed down from his grandfather (who was possibly himself a slave) and claimed that the film illustrated the roots of the diversity of skin color in the contemporary black community. Thus *Mandingo* was for some of our black viewers a learning experience. In fact, in "Pittsburghers Speak Out," Herman Drawn claimed that the film was "realistic" to such an extent that he recommended the film as a pedagogical tool: "It should enlighten kids and those who did not know that this sort of thing ever happened."<sup>50</sup>

Drawn's suggestion that *Mandingo* would be an enlightening film for children stands in stark contrast to Ebert's panicked reaction to the presence of minors in the audience and highlights the tension between the reactions of audiences and critics to the film. I have previously argued that the critical reaction to *Mandingo* becomes intelligible when interpreted in light of two contemporary cultural discourses, the debates over film obscenity and "blaxploitation." In addition to these discourses, I assert that the divide between the near-critical consensus and

the variegated but generally positive responses of black moviegoers becomes even more understandable in light of the emergence of the film critic as cultural expert. Shyon Baumann has written that prior to the 1960s, film critics were primarily journalists assigned to review films. As American cinema began to be considered a legitimate art form via auteur theory and the study of cinema in university classrooms, film critics were elevated to the level of experts who “achieved a degree of influence, prestige and even celebrity that earlier critics never had . . . Film reviews could often play a large part in a film’s success or failure.”<sup>51</sup>

Additionally, Stéphane Debenedetti has argued that although not all consumers historically respond to journalistic criticism, multiple studies have displayed a correlation between critical reviews and box office performance.<sup>52</sup> By the mid-1970s, popular film criticism was an established fixture of American culture, and critics wielded a certain influence in guiding the public towards “good” films and away from “bad” films. Repeatedly throughout the reviews, critics both white and black consistently construct themselves as moral and cultural gatekeepers and the filmgoer foolish enough to find pleasure in *Mandingo* as base and/or stupid. Ida Peters of the *Baltimore Afro American* showed her pained astonishment at the film’s success: “After my blast at . . . *Mandingo*, which is an insult to you, you and you, guess what? Huge crowds of our folks are patiently lined up around the theatre panting to get in and get insulted.”<sup>53</sup> Peters’ use of the word “panting” clearly brings up animalistic associations, and she asserts that the only reasonable reaction to the film is one of insult. Althea Fonville of the *New Pittsburgh Courier* also invoked an animalistic metaphor in her construction of the film’s fans: “[*Mandingo* is] specifically put together for the purposes of feeding the screen image-starved masses.”<sup>54</sup> “Feeding the starved masses” evokes a herd of hungry, homogenous livestock, suggesting that black audiences were so desperate to see blackness on the screen that they’d indiscriminately devour whatever cinematic offal was thrown at them. Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* offered a complementary accusation, constructing the film’s supporters as sexually depraved sadomasochists: “This one [*Mandingo*] is strictly for bondage enthusiasts.”<sup>55</sup>

It should be noted that such discourses are not new and are in fact as old as film itself. Exploitation cinema historian Eric Schaefer writes that “from the earliest days of motion pictures, censorship was justified on the grounds of protection,” particularly for children, individuals from “lower” classes, impressionable spectators prone to violence and immorality, easily offended adults, and the “morals of the community.”<sup>56</sup> During the 1910s and 1920s, local municipalities favored a model of state censor boards to regulate objectionable content. Lest we be tempted to conclude that film critics of the 1970s invented a binary of tasteless, classless masses versus enlightened experts, pre-Code censor boards only hired members “well qualified by education and experience” to police any and all imagery considered “inhuman, immoral, [and] indecent” for fear that it would “incite to crime.”<sup>57</sup> The Production Code reconstituted this construction

in the 1930s under the pretense that motion pictures were "directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking."<sup>58</sup> In the era of the permissive MPAA ratings system, film critics increasingly filled this role of cultural gatekeeper, and when the public ignored their sagely advice and made *Mandingo* one of 1975's more popular films, the critics mounted their own discursive assault via the printed word. They labeled such "immoral" films as trash, branded all fans as degenerates, cited the pleasurable responses to the films as proof of viewers' debased natures, and denied the complex range of reactions that filmgoers actually evinced.

## Conclusion

We began with Paramount's promotional poster for *Mandingo* which invited viewers to shock and sensuality, but also to a revelation of "the truth" of America's miscegenetic past. An examination of the press reviews revealed that critics, with at least one exception, interpreted *Mandingo* as a shameful, exploitive distortion of history. White critics were more concerned with *Mandingo*'s ostensible obscene content, while black critics were more likely to scourge the film as another racist insult fabricated by an uncaring and money-hungry white entertainment establishment. Despite these subtle differences, the press came to a general consensus that *Mandingo* was trash, and any viewer who dared to disagree with the critical community was labeled as debased. A closer analysis of the historical context reveals that critical responses did not occur in a contextless vacuum, but were shaped by multiple interrelated contemporary discourses: the issue of filmic obscenity, racial representation in "blaxploitation" cinema in general, and the expert status of the film critic. Conversely, black audiences showed a wider range of responses to this text than the critical community. While black audiences did not uniformly like the film, many did respond positively to it. More significantly, black audience members largely accepted the veracity of the film's portrayal of sexual exploitation as a constituent element of the American slave system. Many felt that *Mandingo*, a clearly fictional film, spoke the truth about interracial sexual history.

The historic reception of *Mandingo* was a much more complicated event than has been previously acknowledged. We have seen that the simple binary (critics hated it, audiences loved it) proposed by most historical accounts of the film fails to capture the nuance and complexity of the situation. Perhaps it is not unreasonable to argue that all film reception, both historic and contemporary, are far more multifaceted than is often acknowledged. This study is merely one example of the insights into a particular historical filmic era gained by an analysis of the various interpretive agendas and power struggles that are negotiated in the simple act of watching a film. Specifically, this study has shown how the reception of this racially charged text offers a window into the racial politics of the 1970s. As we have seen, *Mandingo* was the first Hollywood film to affirm the constituent nature of sexual exploitation in American slavery, and these tangled

issues of race, sex, and violent exploitation in American history were invoked and debated through criticism of the film. This point is particularly interesting for, although I would never make such an absurd claim that the film accurately represents history, it absolutely tells “the truth” (although in a mediated manner) about America’s racial and sexual history. In this sense, I was dismayed to find that black and white film reviewers in 1975 could not look past the film’s apparent salaciousness to see its discursive value and historical significance, and I was delighted that the black “masses” largely could.

## Notes

1. Allegedly, the film’s producers hired the original artist of the *Gone with the Wind* illustration in order to authentically recreate the graphic look of the film’s poster. Edward D. C., Jr. Campbell, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 185.
2. Cobbett Steinberg, *Reel Facts: The Movie Book of Records* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 26.
3. “Mandingo - Google Search,” [http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&lr=&as\\_qdr=all&q=mandingo&aq=f&aqi=&aql=&oq=&gs\\_rfai=](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&lr=&as_qdr=all&q=mandingo&aq=f&aqi=&aql=&oq=&gs_rfai=) (accessed August 8, 2010).
4. Variety Staff, “*Mandingo*,” *Variety*, January 1, 1975, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117792906.html?categoryid=31&cs=1&query=Mandingo> (accessed August 22, 2008).
5. Robin Wood, “*Mandingo*: The Vindication of an Abused Masterpiece,” in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 265-267.
6. Linda Williams, “Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 271-308.
7. Robert Keser, “The Eye We Cannot Shut: Richard Fleischer’s *Mandingo*,” *Film Journal* 13 (2006), <http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue13/mandingo.html> (accessed August 12, 2008).
8. Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 161-178.
9. Onstott was content to let it remain his first and last novel, but was pressed by Lance Horner, an advertising copywriter from Boston, to continue the series under Horner’s direction. Horner, an open homosexual who was “fascinated by blacks,” wrote seven more Falconhurst novels, many of them containing homosexual interracial sex. Onstott and Horner never met personally and communicated only through writing, yet Onstott edited three of Horner’s Falconhurst novels with Onstott’s name appearing on the front. In the late 70s, Henry Whittington, writing under the pseudonym Ashley Carter, churned out six more Falconhurst novels, bringing the series total to fourteen books. Rudy Maxa, “The Master of Mandingo: A Washington Publisher Helps Shatter the Myth of Moonlight and Magnolias,” *The Washington Post*, July 13, 1975, 193-194.
10. Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code*, 2nd ed. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 285.
11. Josiah Howard, *Blaxploitation Cinema: The Essential Reference Guide* (London: FAB Press, 2008), 12.
12. Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 105-106.
13. Thomas Meehan, “He Makes Movies That Make Money,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1975.
14. Campbell, *The Celluloid South*, 183.
15. Richard Combs, “Fearful Symmetry” (February 2008): 59, 66.
16. Andrew Britton, Douglas Pye, and Ian Cameron, “*Mandingo*,” *Movie*, no. 22 (February 1976): 22.
17. Bill Landis, *Sleazoid Express: A Mind-Twisting Tour Through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 95-96.
18. Staiger suggests at least twenty historical traces in order to offer a thorough account of the reception event. Staiger, *Perverse Spectators*, 163.
19. Roger Ebert, “*Mandingo*,” *Roger Ebert.com*, July 25, 1975, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=19750725/REVIEWS/808289998/1023> (accessed October 13, 2008).
20. Richard Schickel, “Cinema: Cold, Cold Ground,” *Time*, May 12, 1975, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,917443,00.html> (accessed October 2, 2008); Vicky Taylor, “Sand Scripts,” *Yuma Daily Sun*, October 3, 1975.
21. Vincent Canby, “Vapid ‘*Mandingo*’: Sex and Humiliation of Slave-Breeding,” *New York Times*, May 8, 1975, sec. Arts & Leisure.
22. Paul Monaco, *The Sixties, 1960-1969* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2001), 62-64.



23. David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, History of the American Cinema 9 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 271.
24. Marilyn Beck and Ellsworth Redinger, "As Taboos Topple, the Porno Parade Begins," *Chicago Tribune*, September 28, 1975, sec. Arts and Fun.
25. Canby, "Vapid 'Mandingo': Sex and Humiliation of Slave-Breeding."
26. Ebert, "Mandingo."
27. Ebert's statement is particularly ironic in light of the fact that, five years earlier, the film critic wrote the screenplay to the bawdy sexploitation parody *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970) for the infamous soft porn director Russ Meyer.
28. Charles Shere, "Mandingo—Portrayal of Slavery's Corruption," *Oakland Tribune*, May 13, 1975.
29. Ibid.
30. Jacqueline Trescott, "Mandingo: Glorifying an Unglorious Period," *The Washington Post*, May 21, 1975.
31. Althea Fonville, "'Mandingo'—Another Black Exploitation Film," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, June 14, 1975; Ida Peters, "What's Happening: 'Mandingo' . . . Sick, Brutal!," *Baltimore Afro American*, May 24, 1975.
32. To clarify, *Mandingo* was not the first Hollywood film to decry slavery in general. In *The Celluloid South*, Edward D. C. Campbell cites *The Foxes of Harrow* (1947) as the first American film to depict slavery in a negative light and discusses a series of subsequent films that widened the scope of this discourse. Nor was *Mandingo* the American film to depict interracial sexuality as a constituent element of the American slave trade. Several American exploitation films of the post-Code 60s and 70's directly explored interracial sexual exploitation and slavery, including *Slaves* (dir: Herbert J. Biberman, 1969) *Pleasure Plantation* (dir: Jerry Denby, 1970) *Quadroon* (also titled *Black Agony: The Color of Truth*, dir: Herbert Janneke Jr., 1972), and *Black Snake* (dir: Russ Meyer, 1973). I am asserting that *Mandingo* was the first mainstream Hollywood film to acknowledge the presence of interracial sexual exploitation in the American system of slavery. The four films mentioned in this note were all independently produced and none enjoyed the wide release or the notoriety of *Mandingo*. Therefore *Mandingo* is textually unique among Hollywood films. See Campbell, *The Celluloid South*.
33. Vernon Jarrett, "Curtain's Still up on Blaxploitation," *Chicago Tribune*, September 7, 1975.
34. For discussions of this historic issue, see Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's the Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008); Jesse Algeron Rhines, *Black Film/White Money* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Jane M. Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001); Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*.
35. Jon Hartmann, "The Trope of Blaxploitation in Critical Responses to 'Sweetback,'" *Film History* 6, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 393-395.
36. Howard, *Blaxploitation Cinema*, 12.
37. Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 94; Howard, *Blaxploitation Cinema*, 13.
38. Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s*, 95.
39. Jarrett, "Curtain's Still up on Blaxploitation."
40. Ida Peters, "What's Happening," *Baltimore Afro American*, May 27, 1975.
41. For examples of white critical responses to "blaxploitation," see Jon Hartmann, "The Trope of Blaxploitation in Critical Responses to *Sweetback*."
42. Fonville, "'Mandingo'—Another Black Exploitation Film."
43. Trescott, "Mandingo: Glorifying an Unglorious Period."
44. Recall that one white reviewer, Richard Shere, praised *Mandingo*. He was, however, the exception and not the rule.
45. Britton, Pye, and Cameron, "Mandingo," 29.
46. Landis, *Sleazoid Express*, 96.
47. Wood, "Mandingo: The Vindication of an Abused Masterpiece," 267.
48. Flipping and Harris, "Pittsburghers Speak Out: Readers Have Mixed Reactions On 'Mandingo,'" *New Pittsburgh Courier*, June 21, 1975.
49. Ida Peters, "What's Happening," *Baltimore Afro American*, May 31, 1975.
50. Flipping and Harris, "Pittsburghers Speak Out: Readers Have Mixed Reactions On 'Mandingo'."
51. Shyon Baumann, "Marketing, Cultural Hierarchy, and the Relevance of Critics: Film in the United States, 1935-1980," *Poetics* 30 (August 2002): 260.
52. Stéphane Debenedetti, "The Role of Media Critics in the Culture Industries," *International Journal of Arts Management* 8, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 35-36.
53. Peters, "What's Happening."
54. Fonville, "'Mandingo'—Another Black Exploitation Film."
55. Canby, "Vapid 'Mandingo': Sex and Humiliation of Slave-Breeding."

56. Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 138.
57. *Ibid.*, 139.
58. Leff and Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono*, 284.

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